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A New Drive for Greater Fuel Efficiency

Senators press labor, automakers and Mineta to back higher standards for cars.

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WASHINGTON — In a sign of the political recalibrations sparked by high gasoline costs, senators Tuesday urged representatives of the auto industry and labor — two powerful interest groups — to back efforts to raise fuel efficiency standards that they have resisted for years.

The lawmakers also grilled Secretary of Transportation Norman Y. Mineta, accusing him of doing too little in recent years to increase the gasoline economy requirements for the automobiles that burn about half of all the oil consumed in the United States.

"We're in a crisis. Your own administration says that," Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) told Mineta.

She chided him over a recent move by his agency to slightly increase the fuel-efficiency standard for sport-utility vehicles and small trucks, starting in the 2011 model year. Under the decision, the efficiency standard for those vehicles will be set at 24 miles per gallon.

Noting that U.S. automakers can produce pickup trucks that get 38 mpg, Boxer said: "You think you're so bold? ... You are so far behind what's even happening in the marketplace."

The major question looming before Congress and the administration is how to go about toughening fuel efficiency standards for the broader range of vehicles — passenger cars. It is an issue that has stalemated Washington for years — in large part because of the opposition of automakers, who have clout with the Republican Party, and auto workers, an influential voice among Democrats.

The opponents have argued that significant increases in the mileage requirements for passenger cars would result in vehicles that are less safe and would contribute to the loss of U.S. jobs to foreign manufacturers.

But even those, including President Bush and other Republicans, who have long argued that the issue is best solved by market forces, are now discussing the need for new government involvement.

"We've met the enemy and it is us: We, the people," said Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.), chairman of the Senate subcommittee that conducted Tuesday's hearing on the issue.

Lott added: "Hey, folks — you can't have cheap gas, big-hog automobiles and not want a refinery in your neighborhood.... You can't have all three of those simultaneously. And so we've got to start making some choices here."

A massive energy bill approved in 2005 bypassed the mileage requirement issue. But less than a year later, Democrats and Republicans are saying that something must be done to make cars more fuel-efficient.

"We should have done more a long time ago, across the board, in a whole lot of areas," Lott said.

Consumer complaints about rising prices at the pump have spurred new calls to increase the mileage requirements for passenger cars from the current fleet average of 27.5 mpg, a standard first set in 1975 and achieved in 1990.

Still, it remains uncertain whether the concerns about gasoline costs will lead to higher standards or protracted wrangling. Tuesday's hearing underscored a key difference in approach that might stymie the effort.

Some Democrats are pressing for immediate action through legislation that would set a new fleet standard at 33 mpg. But the administration is against imposing new requirements on cars until the federal fuel economy rules are changed to make them more flexible for industry.

"The president and I are committed to improving fuel economy across the board through an open regulatory process built upon sound science and economics, but we will not accept an arbitrary statutory increase under the current passenger cars system," Mineta told the subcommittee.

He also said, "It's important that if passenger car fuel economy standards are raised, that we make the necessary structural reforms to avoid compromising safety and causing job loss."

In a sign of the changed political climate, the representatives of auto manufacturers and labor appearing at the hearing did not argue against increasing the standards. Instead, they urged that the requirements be raised in a manner that does not lead to the loss of jobs or competitive advantage.

Alan Reuther, legislative director for the United Auto Workers, said it was important to his members that manufacturers continue to assemble their full fleet, from large trucks to compact autos, inside the United States.

That "would prevent the full-line auto manufacturers from off-shoring all of their small-

car production, which would be a huge negative-jobs impact on this country," Reuther said.

A Supreme Court decision has left it unclear whether the administration or Congress has the prime legal authority to set fuel efficiency standards for passenger cars. As a result, the White House has asked Congress to pass legislation clearly giving the administration the authority.

But some senators expressed resistance to handing the job over entirely to the administration, questioning whether it would be aggressive enough.

"We're depending on the most volatile regions of the world for our energy," Sen. Olympia J. Snowe (R-Maine) said. "And other countries are getting ahead of us on this question."

Mineta cautioned that increasing fuel efficiency is a long-term strategy that would do little or nothing in the short term to lower gasoline prices. "The urgency is there to get it done, but in terms of its impact, [it] will not be immediate," he said.

David Friedman, research director of the Union of Concerned Scientists, argued that consumers should not be blamed for buying cars that are less fuel efficient. Instead, he said, auto makers should be doing more to improve the fuel economy of vehicles of all sizes and classes.

"What we have lacking in the showroom is the 41-mpg family car, the 37-mpg minivan, the 34-mpg mid-sized SUV and the 30-mpg pickup," he said.

"These are vehicles that ... are possible with existing technology."